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The Problem of Declining Enrollment in the Elementary Schools of Lawrence County

W. F. Kumlien

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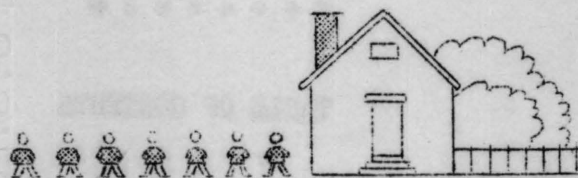
April, 1942

THE PROBLEM OF DECLINING ENROLLMENT
in
The Elementary Schools
of
Lawrence County

W. F. Kumlien
Howard M. Sauer
C. Scandrette



In 1910, 1,215 pupils were enrolled in the rural schools of Lawrence county



but in 1940 the total enrollment was only 701

Each figure represents 100 pupils

Department of Rural Sociology
Agricultural Experiment Station of the South Dakota State College of
Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, Brookings, South Dakota

EXPLANATORY NOTE

During recent years, enrollments in most South Dakota elementary schools have declined at a very rapid rate. The prevailing type of rural school district organization in most counties has proved rather ineffective in coping with dwindling enrollments and with the consequent high costs per pupil.

It is the purpose of this pamphlet to assist educators, school board members and other Lawrence county leaders, by analyzing the nature of the problem and by presenting suggestions for its solution; as they have grown out of the experiences of other South Dakota communities.

* * * * *

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

* * * * *

This study was made possible through the cooperation of the State and Federal Work Projects Administration and the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station. The project is officially designated as W. P. A. Project No. 265-1-74-57. The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Mrs. Laura Bentz, the Lawrence County Superintendent of Schools, from whose office most of the data used in this study were secured; and of high school superintendents who supplied lists of their tuition students.

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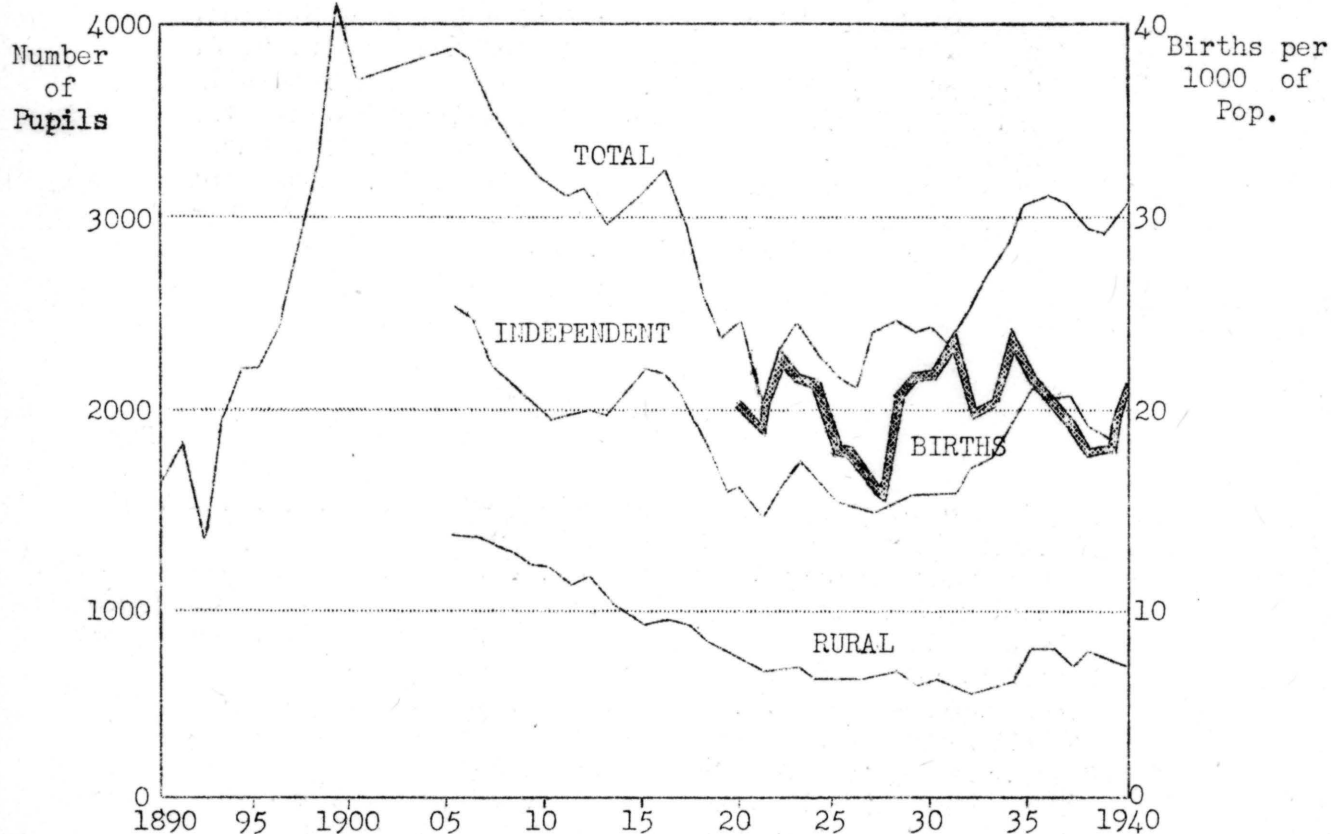
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The Problem of Declining Enrollments in the Elementary Schools of Lawrence County

For some years past, population experts have been predicting a general decline in elementary enrollments as a natural outgrowth of the downward trend in the birth rate.

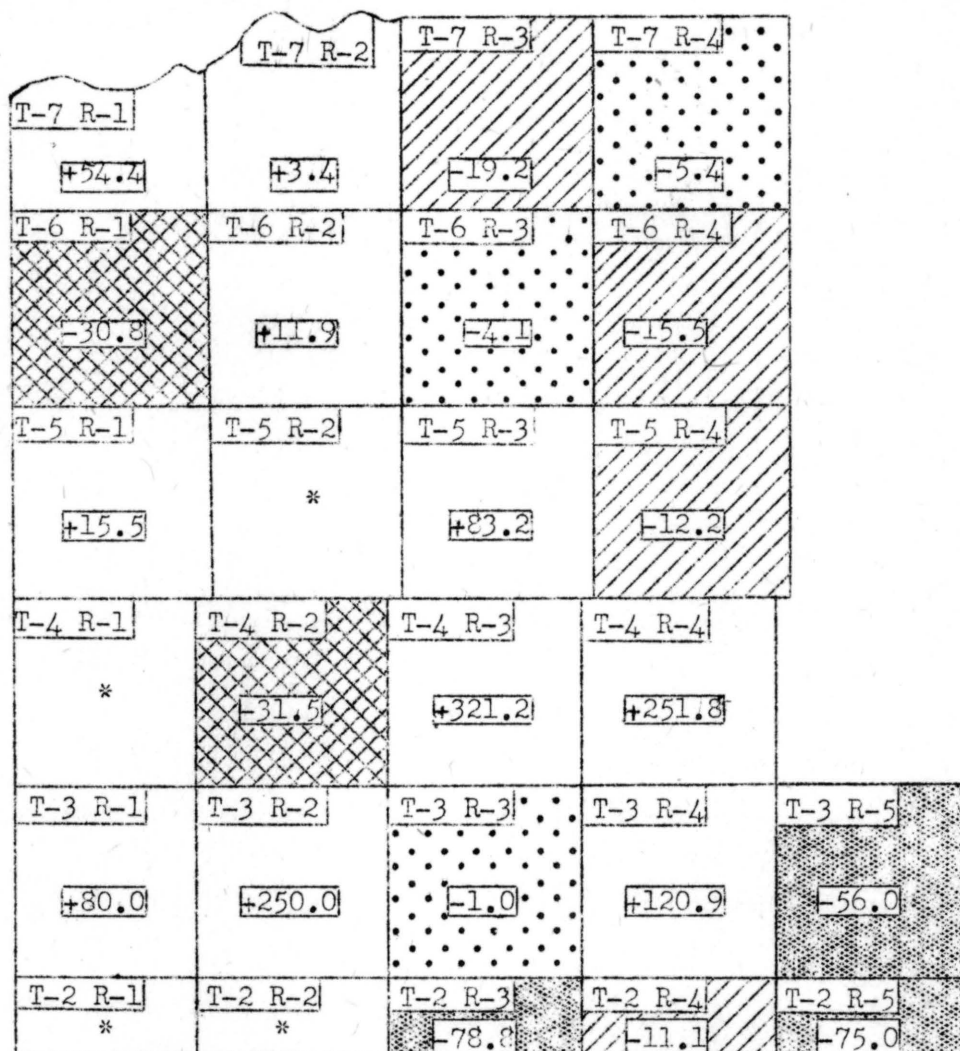
The average birth rate for the period 1920-25 in Lawrence county was 21.3 births per 1,000 persons, while the average for the period 1936-40 was 19.4 births per 1,000 persons. This decrease is less than the decline for the state and nation as a whole. Nevertheless, the fact that the proportion of pupils entering the first grade is decreasing (see figure 7) indicates that it has affected school enrollments. The effect of this trend on total elementary enrollments in Lawrence county, however, is nullified by the unusual gains in population. Figure 1 indicates that total elementary enrollments have increased during the period 1920-1940. It will be noted that rural enrollment decreased slightly during this period.

Figure 1. Elementary School Enrollment in Lawrence County, 1890-1940, and Birth Rate Trend, 1920 - 1940









Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction and Reports of the State Board of Health.

Figure 2. Population Gains or Losses in Lawrence County, 1930 - 1940



Legend:

- | | | | |
|---|-------------------|---|--------------------|
|  | Gained |  | Lost 20.0 - 29.9% |
|  | Lost 0.0 - 9.9% |  | Lost 30.0 - 39.9% |
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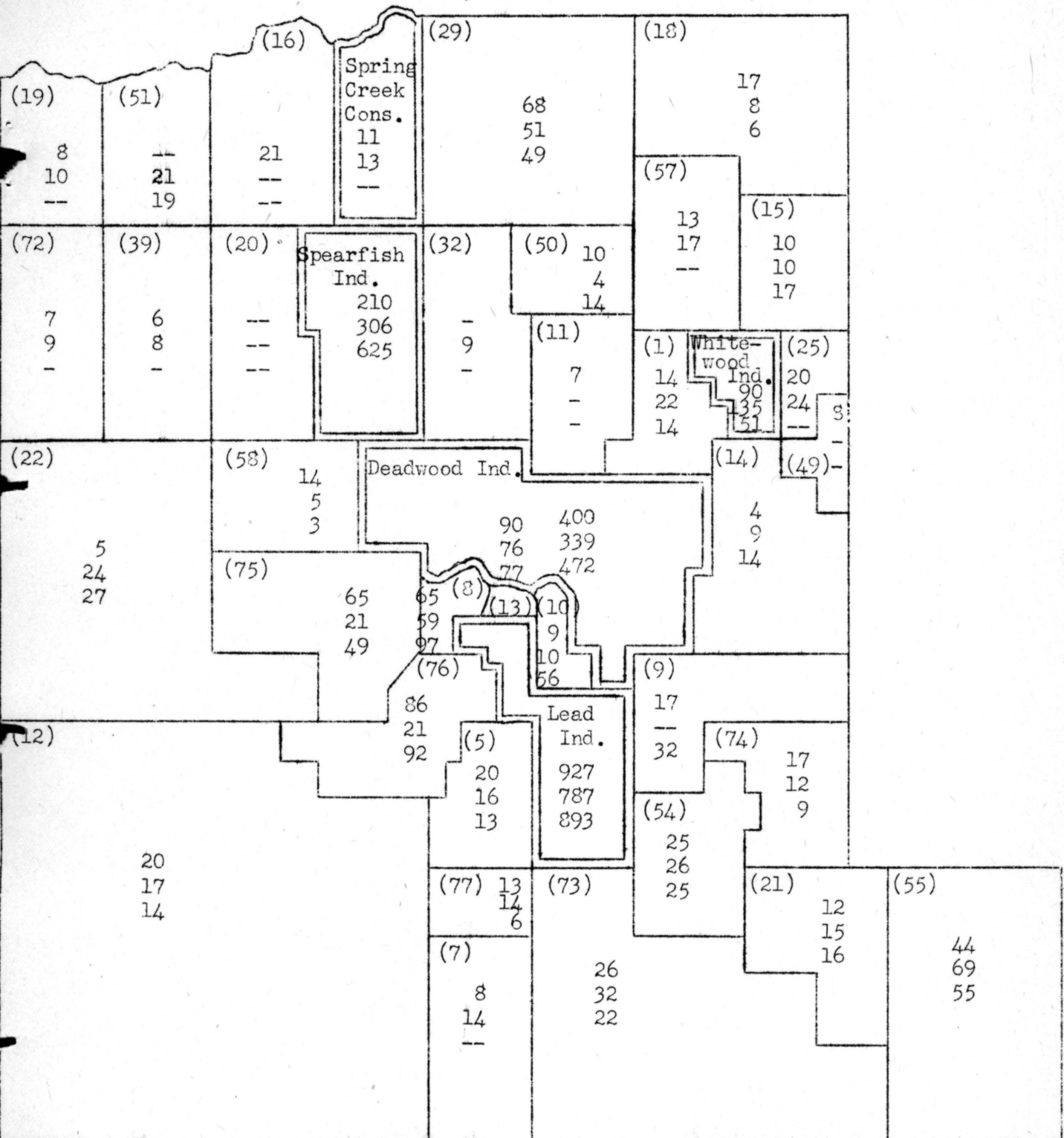
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Source: Sixteenth U. S. Census, 1940

During the ten year period between 1930 and 1940 South Dakota lost 7.2 percent of its population. This loss has been an important factor in the elementary enrollment decline which has been evident throughout the state. While these losses were general throughout the agricultural areas of the state, gains were experienced in the Black Hills mining areas. Lawrence county led all other Black Hills counties with a gain of 37.2 percent. The greatest gains were experienced in the cities of Lead and Deadwood and surrounding territory, the center of the mining industry. Deadwood alone showed a population gain of 60.2 percent in this period.

In contrast to these gains some of the agricultural townships of the county showed heavy losses, ranging from 5.4 percent to as high as 78.8 percent. This decline has resulted in a loss in rural enrollments in these areas. The direct relationship between population loss and enrollment decline is indicated by the fact that enrollments increased in those areas where the increases in population were greatest and decreased in areas where outward migration brought about a decrease in population.

Figure 3. Elementary School Enrollments in Lawrence County Districts,
1920, 1930 and 1940



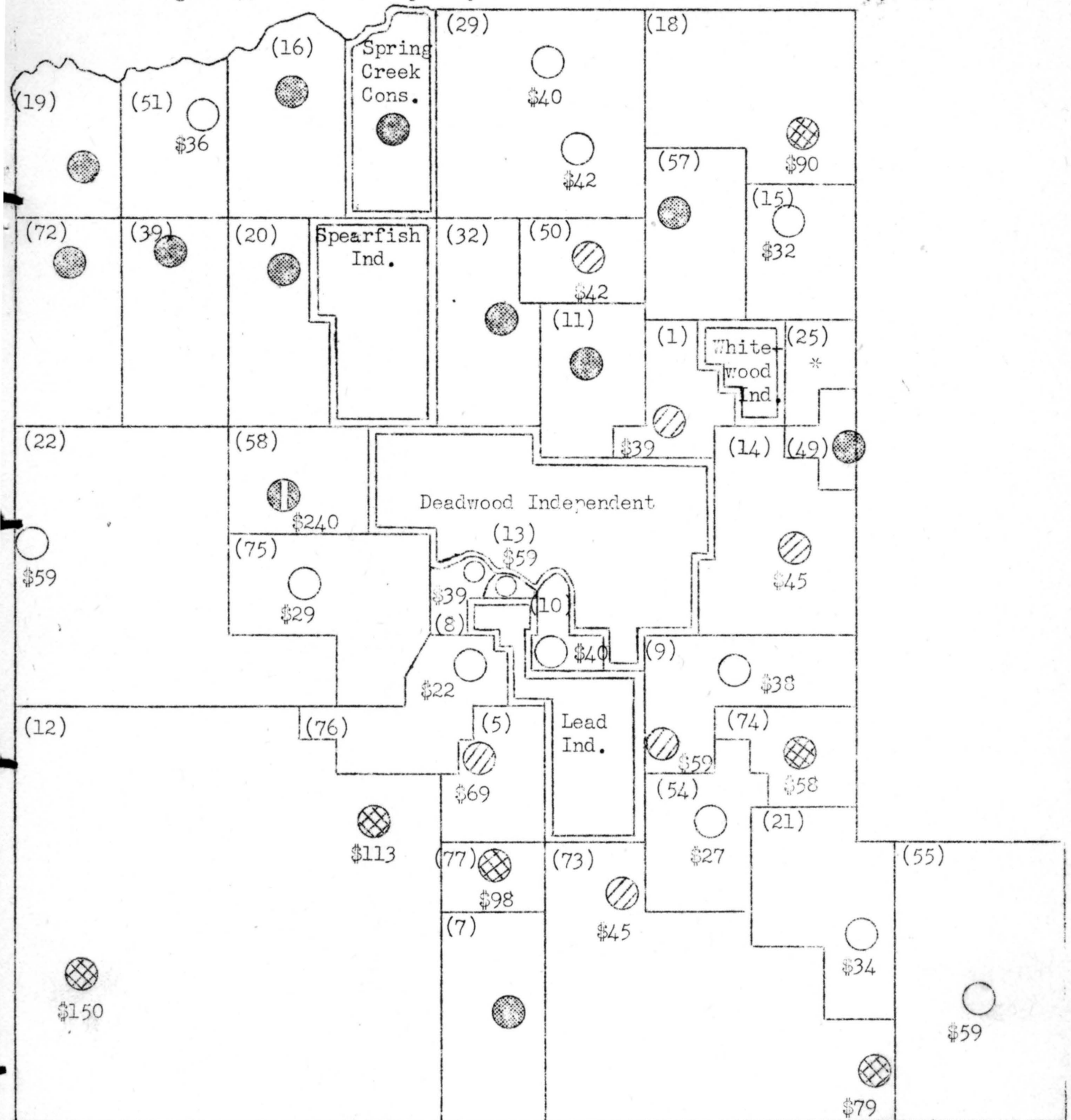
Legend: Top figure 1920 enrollment
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Figures in () indicates district number
Source: Records of Lawrence County Superintendent
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In 1940, 27 schools were in operation in 34 common districts of Lawrence county, in addition to schools in the independent districts of Lead, Deadwood, Spearfish and Whitewood. Figure 3 lists the enrollments of each district for 1920, 1930 and 1940. The fact that Lawrence county had a sharp increase in population during this period, accounts for the increase in total elementary enrollments. Increases were large in independent districts as well as districts in the rural areas of greatest increase in population. However, it will be noted that losses occurred in 18 rural districts, losses being particularly heavy in the north-western part of the county.

Eleven schools had been closed but only one was operating with five or fewer pupils. Six schools enrolled from six to ten pupils each and six schools had from eleven to fifteen pupils enrolled. In fourteen schools 16 or more pupils were enrolled. The fact that eleven schools had been closed and only one school had five or fewer pupils indicates that a serious effort had been made to meet the situation in the districts of Lawrence county where enrollments had fallen below the minimum for operating schools efficiently.

Figure 4. Cost Per Pupil by Size of School in Lawrence County, 1940



Legend: Closed School 5 or fewer pupils 6 - 10 pupils 11 - 15 pupils 16 or more pupils

* Joint district with one in Meade county

Figure in () indicates district number

Figure below circle represent cost per pupil

Source: Records of Lawrence County Superintendent of Schools, 1940

As Figure 4 indicates, the cost per pupil in the schools of Lawrence county vary widely. Schools with the smallest enrollment show the greatest per pupil cost. The cost per pupil of operating the rural schools of Lawrence county ranged from \$22 in district 76 which enrolled 97 pupils in 1940, to \$240 per pupil in district 58 with only three pupils enrolled.

Table 1 (below) indicates that the operation of schools for less than ten pupils is excessively expensive on a cost per pupil basis. The one school in Lawrence county with five or fewer pupils nicely illustrates this point. As mentioned above, the cost per pupil for this school was \$240 as compared to the \$44.38 average for all schools. The average cost per pupil, \$94.76, in schools having enrollments of six to ten pupils was almost twice as great as the average cost per pupil, \$49.39, in schools having enrollments of eleven to fifteen pupils. In schools of 16 or more pupils the average cost per pupil was only \$39.17.

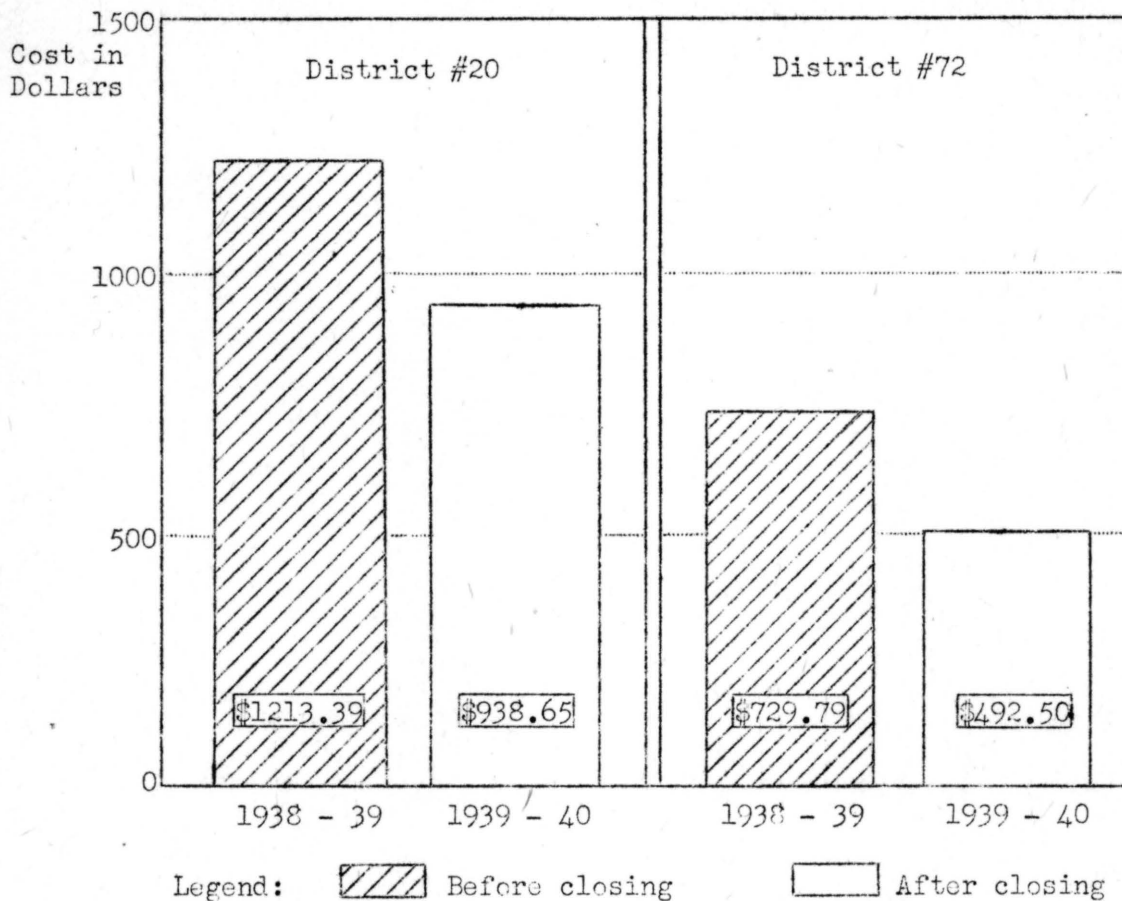
Table 1. Instructional Cost* per Pupil for Operating Schools Of Various Sizes in Lawrence County, 1940

Size of School	Number of Schools	Number of Pupils	Total Cost	Average Cost Per Pupil
Total	38	705	\$31,287.50	\$44.38
Closed schools	11	---	--	--
5 or fewer pupils	1	3	720.00	240.00
6 - 10 pupils	6	43	4,075.00	94.76
11 - 15 pupils	6	82	4,050.00	49.39
16 or more pupils	14	577	22,442.50	39.17

* Based on teachers' salaries only

Source: Records of the Lawrence County Superintendent of Schools

Figure 5. Cost of Educating Pupils Before and After Closing The Schools in Districts 20 and 72 in Lawrence County



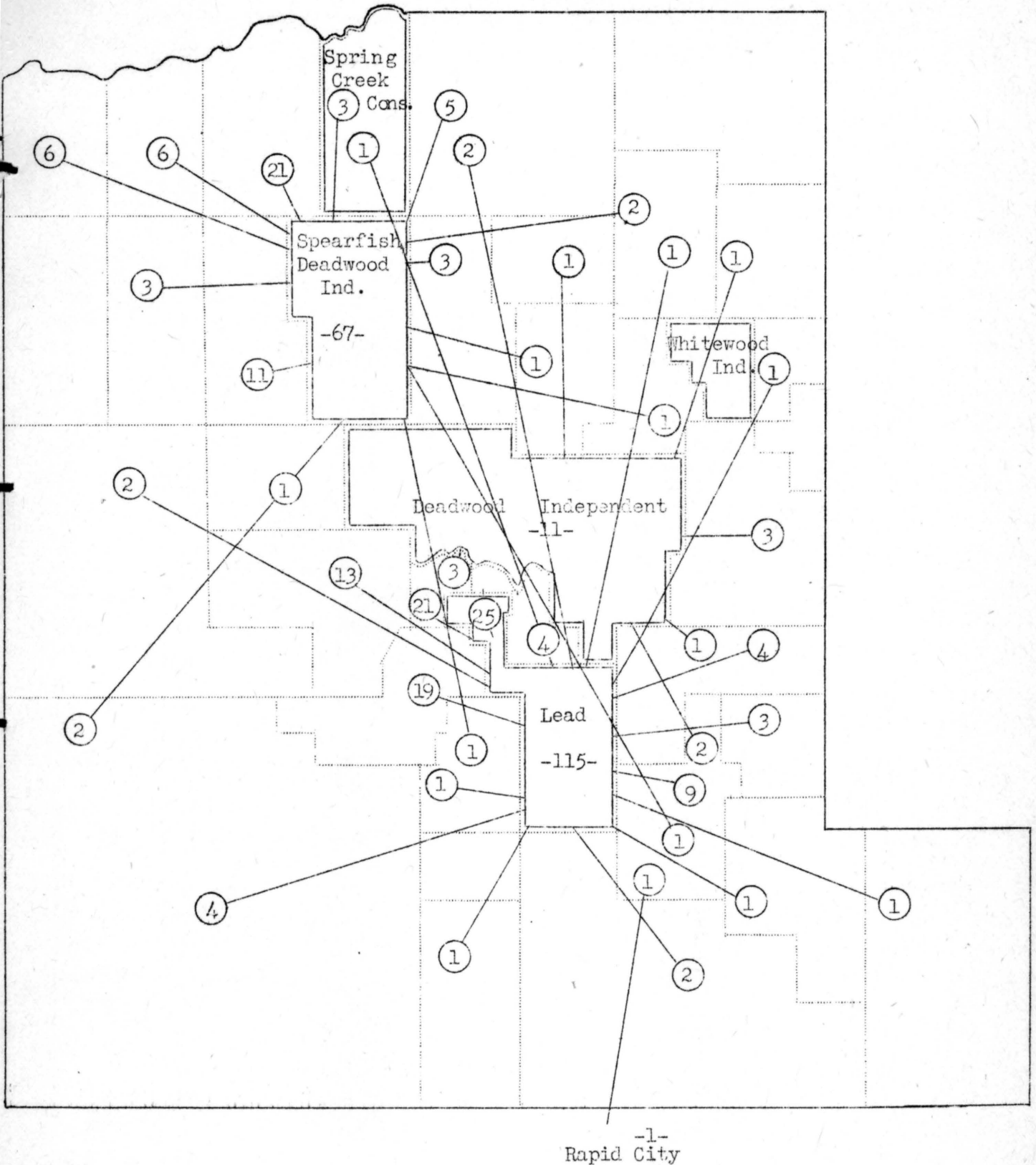
Source: Records of Lawrence County Superintendent of Schools

To reduce high per pupil costs school districts throughout South Dakota have closed a large number of schools during recent years, particularly those with diminishing enrollments. As previously noted, a number of schools have closed in Lawrence county in accordance with this practice.

During the 1938-39 school term, operating costs for Districts 72 totaled \$729.79. The following year the school was closed and the pupils were sent to another district with the home district paying their tuition and transportation. That year the cost of educating the remaining pupils, including the tuition and transportation payments, was \$492.50 or 32.5 percent less than the previous year. A similar economy was effected in district 20 by following the same plan. During the 1938-39 school term the cost of educating pupils in this district was \$1,213.39. The following year the district school was closed and the remaining pupils were sent to a neighboring school as paying guests at a cost to the district of only \$938.65. Since the cost per pupil increases and educational efficiency decreases* as the number of pupils attending school declines, it seems practical both from the standpoint of economy and educational efficiency to close a school when the enrollment drops to five or fewer pupils.

* It is common knowledge among teachers that where there are only one or two pupils to a grade it is usually difficult to properly motivate the student.

Figure 6. Areas From Which High Schools Drew Their Lawrence County Tuition Students, 1940



Legend:

-0- Total number of tuition students

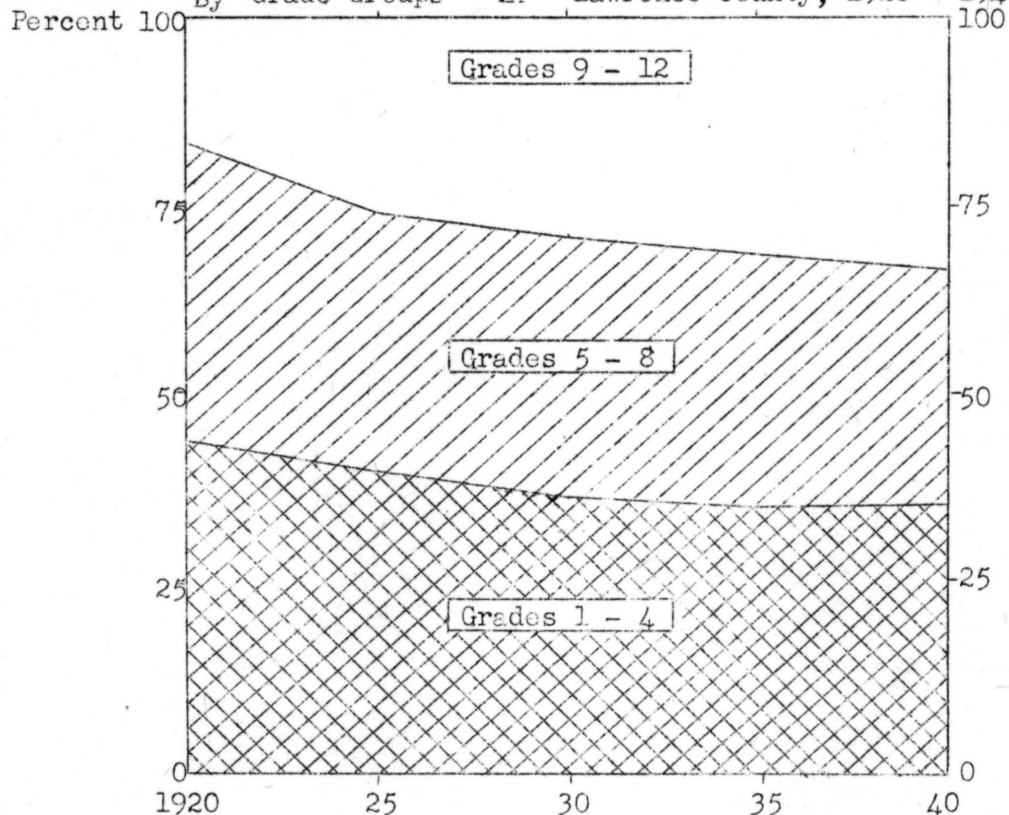
○ Number of tuition students from each district

Source: Records of Lawrence County High School Superintendents

Since 1921, school districts of South Dakota lacking high schools of their own have been required by law to pay tuition costs for resident students who attend high school outside of the district. Figure 6 shows the areas from which high schools drew their Lawrence county tuition students, numbering approximately 194, in 1940. Realizing that the cost of operating their own secondary schools would be prohibitive, district boards of Lawrence county have adopted the policy of sending their students as tuition pupils to independent districts in town and village centers. As elementary enrollments continue to shrink and cost per pupil to mount the adoption of a similar plan for elementary pupils should probably be seriously considered. Small rural schools could be closed and the remaining pupils sent to village schools, with the home district paying the tuition and transportation cost. This plan has the advantage of economy and of extending to farm children the superior educational facilities of the town school.

However, until the time that concentration of educational services in town centers becomes more general, districts may well continue their policy of closing those schools in which enrollments fall below a minimum and sending their remaining pupils to the nearest rural school still operating, paying tuition and transportation charges as provided by law.

Figure 7. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollments,
By Grade Groups in Lawrence County, 1920 - 1940



Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Between 1920 and 1940 the proportion enrolled in the first four elementary grades in Lawrence county shrank from 44.7 to 35.1 percent of the total elementary and secondary enrollment. (See Figure 7.) The reason for this trend may be found in the decline of the birth rate during this period. Consequently there have been fewer and fewer pupils each year to enter the first grade. The enrollment for the four upper elementary grades decreased from 39.0 to 31.3 percent of the total during the same period, while the high school enrollment increased from 16.3 percent to 33.6 percent, making the enrollments for the three groupings practically equal in 1940.

The fact that high school enrollment has more than doubled in Lawrence county during this period may be attributed to the fact that an increasing number of eighth grade graduates are continuing their education in high school.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollment by Grades, 1920 - 1940

Year	Grade											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1920	13.4	10.9	8.6	11.9	10.0	10.6	9.2	9.2	6.2	4.7	3.0	2.3
1925	10.9	9.8	9.5	9.2	8.8	9.3	8.8	7.6	10.3	7.6	4.5	3.7
1930	9.1	8.7	9.1	8.5	9.2	8.4	7.9	9.1	9.9	7.4	6.9	5.8
1935	10.5	8.5	7.6	8.4	8.2	8.6	7.9	8.9	9.4	8.2	6.9	6.9
1940	9.9	8.3	8.9	8.0	8.2	8.0	7.8	7.1	9.8	9.6	8.0	6.4

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1920, 1925, 1930, 1935 and 1940

How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities Are Successfully
Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem

School boards confronted with the problem of declining enrollments should study their local situation carefully before taking action. The four plans listed below have all been tested by different South Dakota communities and have been found practical. One or the other of the first two alternatives has frequently been used as a temporary measure until further action was necessary. The last two plans are in the nature of a more or less permanent reorganization of the present rural district system.

Cooperating with nearby rural schools

When enrollment has dropped to five or fewer pupils certain districts have kept their district organization intact but have closed one or more schools. In cases where all schools of the district have been closed, the remaining pupils have been sent to the nearest adjoining rural school where satisfactory arrangements for tuition and transportation could be made.

Tuition pupils to town schools

Where satisfactory arrangements could not be made with nearby rural schools, the remaining pupils have been sent as tuition students to the nearest independent school in village or town. This plan is frequently no more expensive than the first, but has the further advantage of better educational experience than is usually possible in the one room school. In effect, it is essentially the same method which has been successfully used in sending farm children as tuition pupils to high school.

Consolidation

Where the second plan has been in operation for a number of years, town and nearby country districts have frequently consolidated into a single district. Such a plan has many advantages, but should first be tried out informally as a centralized school system before determining the details of consolidation.

County-wide district plan

The county-wide system exists in the four unorganized counties of South Dakota, Shannon, Todd, Washington and Washabaugh. Under this plan one county school board determines the location of rural schools and can regulate the number of such schools to fit in with the enrollment trend.

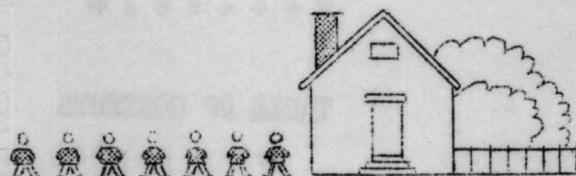
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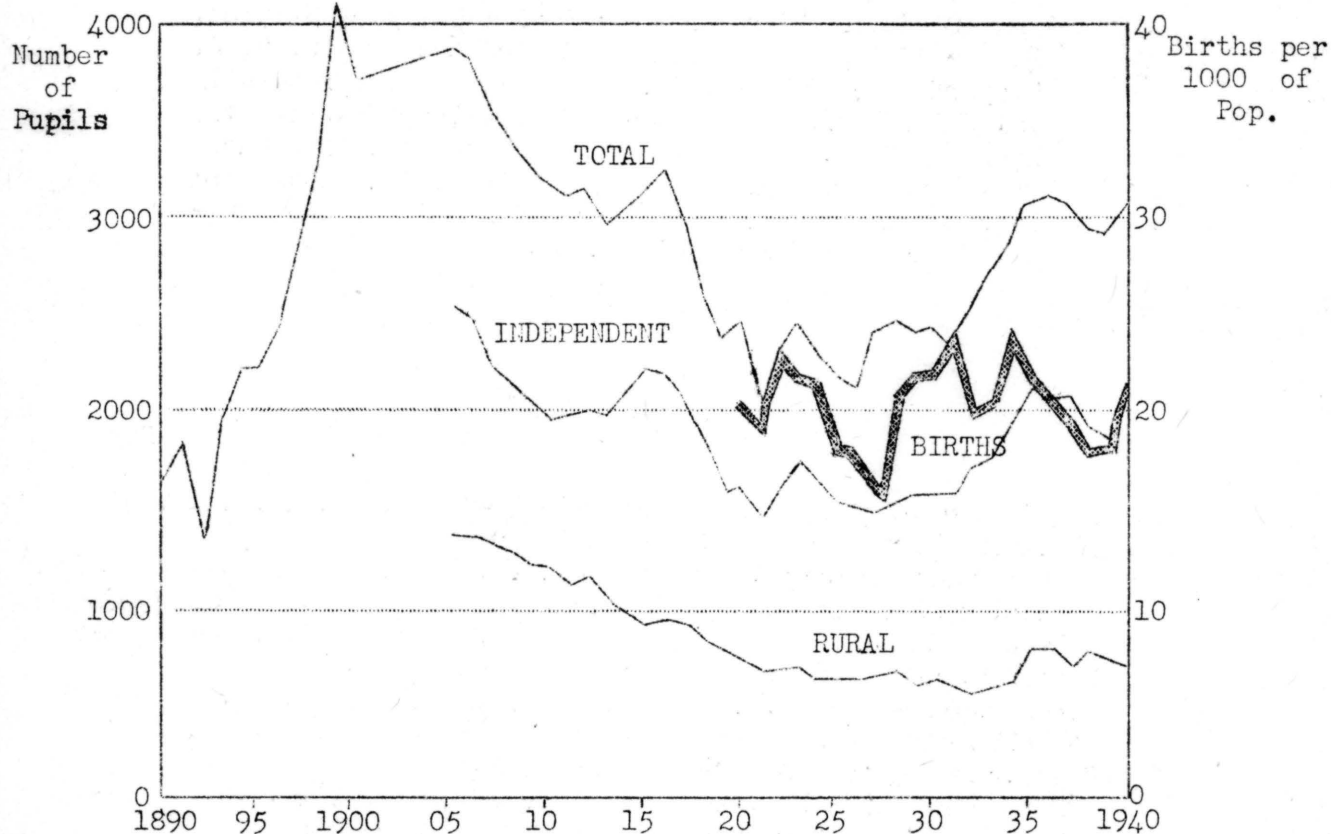
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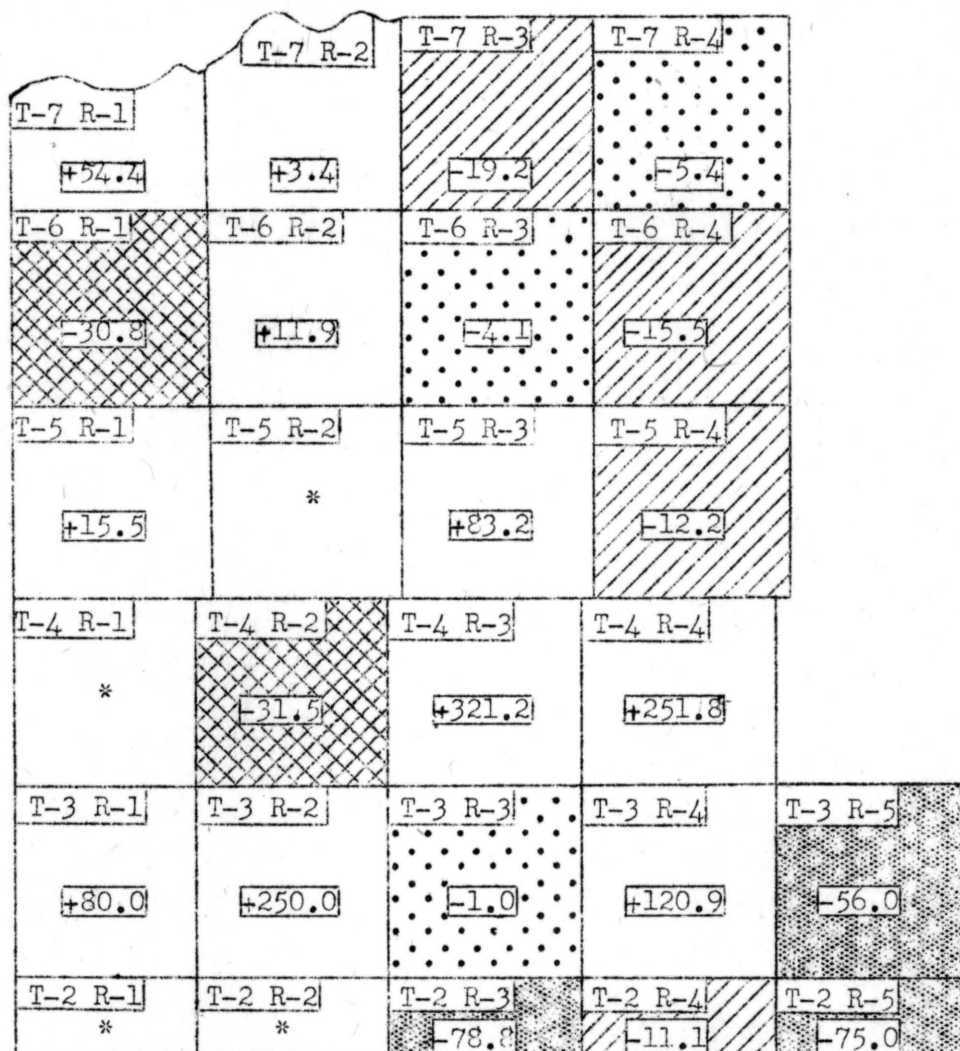
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







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Figure 2. Population Gains or Losses in Lawrence County, 1930 - 1940



Legend:

	Gained		Lost 20.0 - 29.9%
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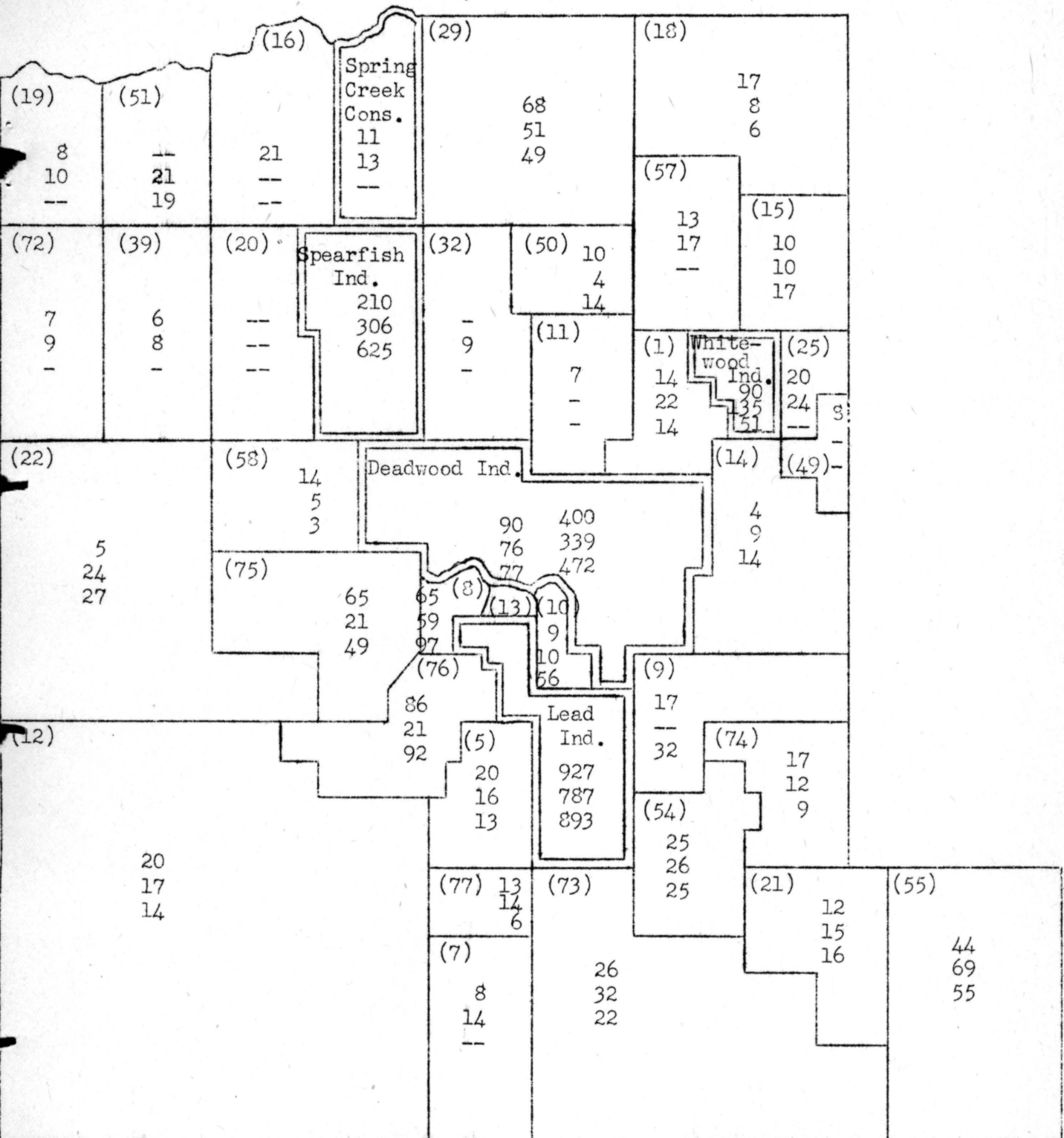
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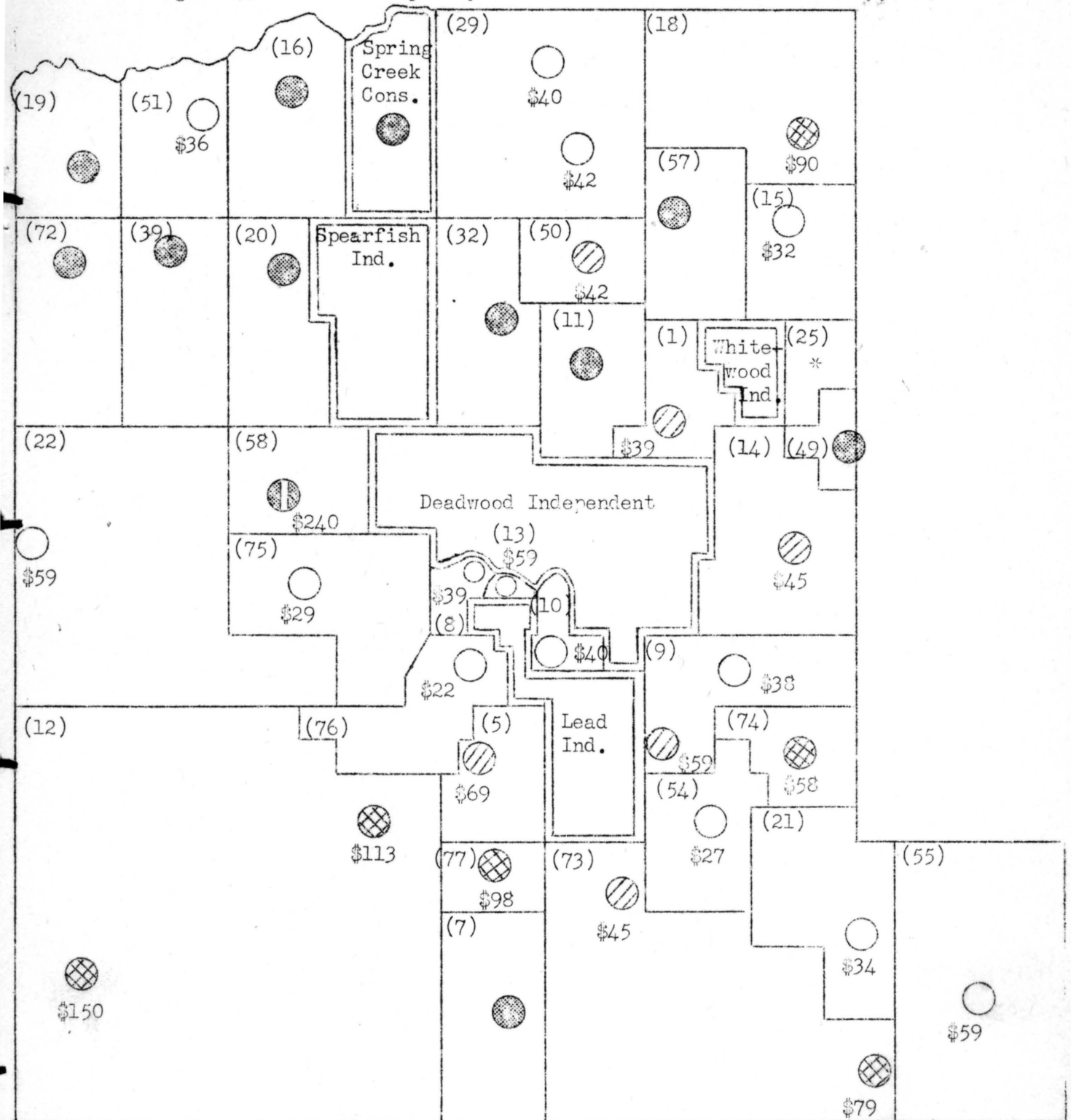
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Figure 4. Cost Per Pupil by Size of School in Lawrence County, 1940



Legend: ● Closed School ● 5 or fewer pupils ● 6 - 10 pupils ● 11 - 15 pupils
 ○ 16 or more pupils

* Joint district with one in Meade county

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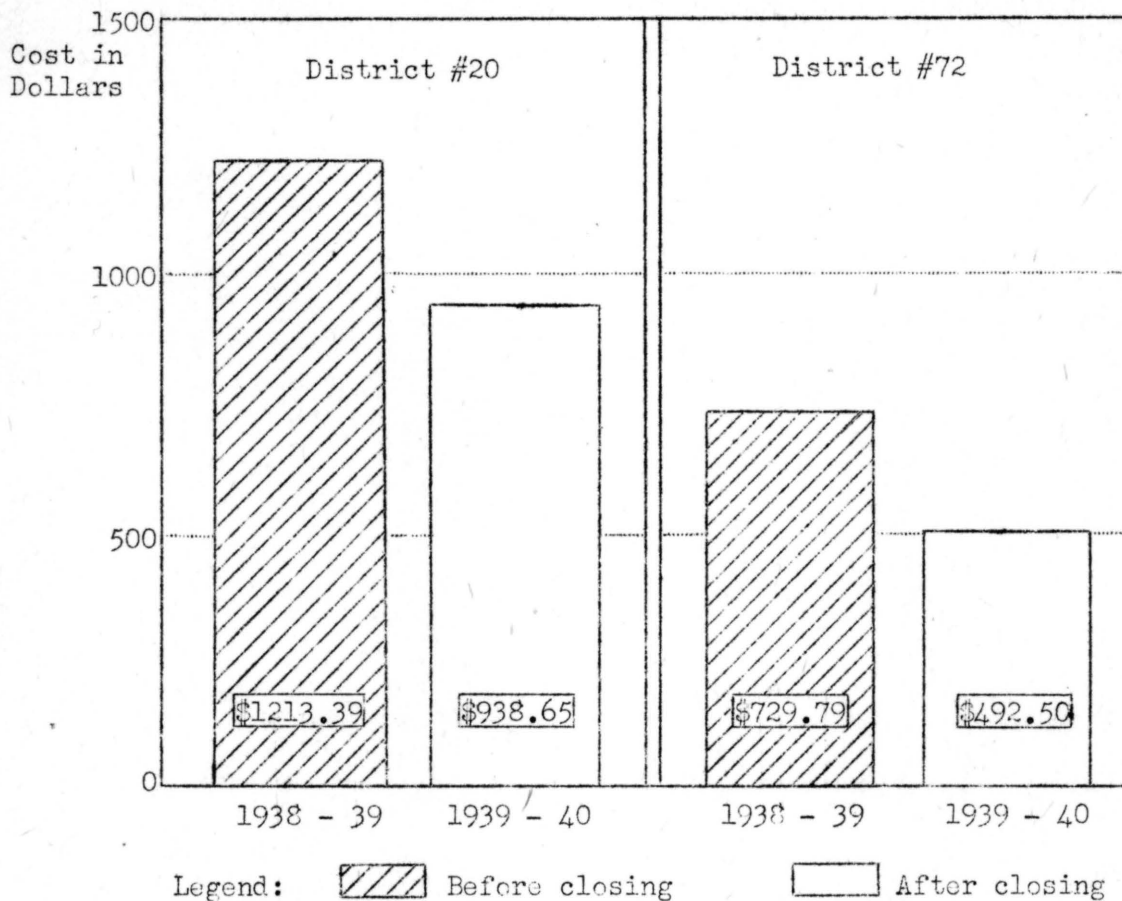
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Figure 5. Cost of Educating Pupils Before and After Closing The Schools in Districts 20 and 72 in Lawrence County



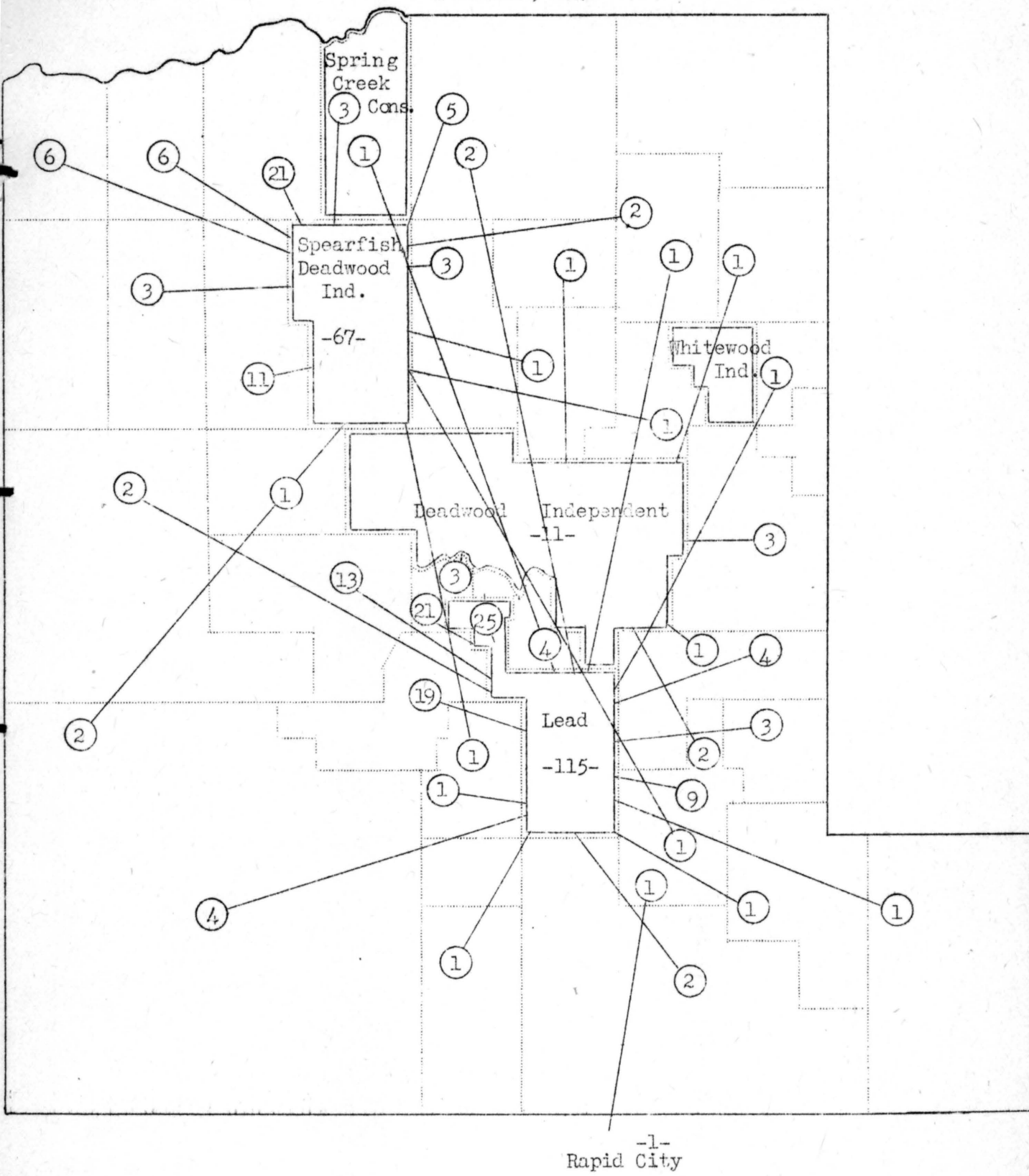
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Figure 6. Areas From Which High Schools Drew Their Lawrence County Tuition Students, 1940



Legend:

-0- Total number of tuition students

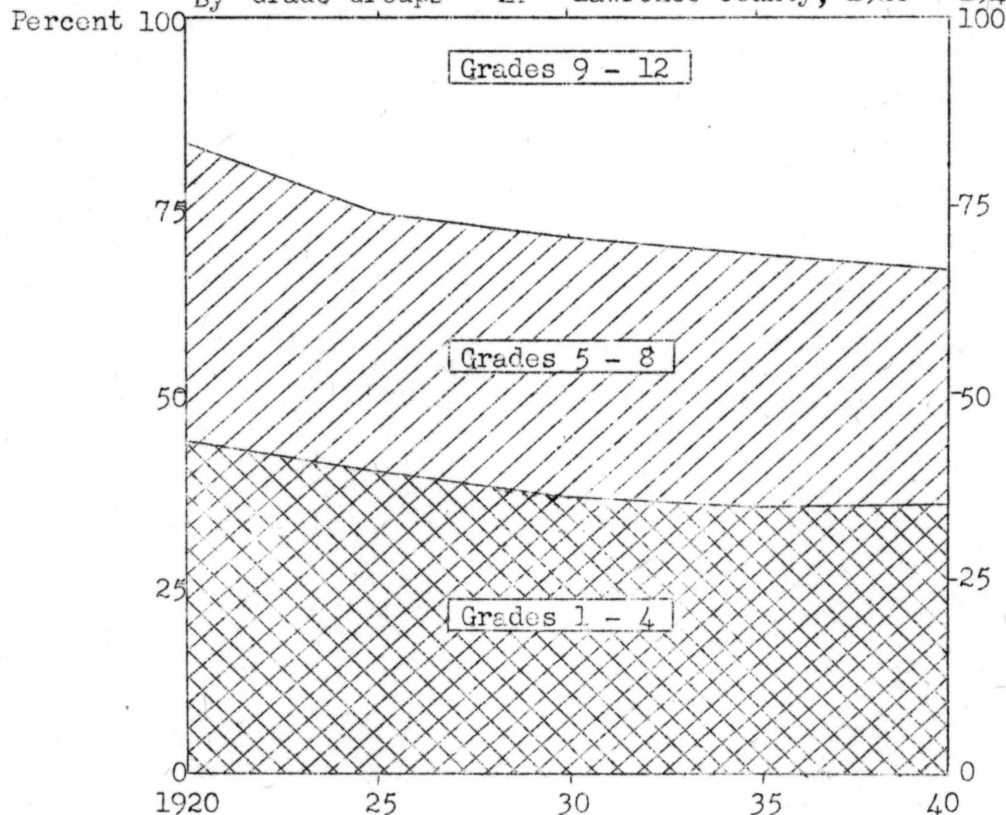
○ Number of tuition students from each district

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By Grade Groups in Lawrence County, 1920 - 1940



Source: Biennial Reports of State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Between 1920 and 1940 the proportion enrolled in the first four elementary grades in Lawrence county shrank from 44.7 to 35.1 percent of the total elementary and secondary enrollment. (See Figure 7.) The reason for this trend may be found in the decline of the birth rate during this period. Consequently there have been fewer and fewer pupils each year to enter the first grade. The enrollment for the four upper elementary grades decreased from 39.0 to 31.3 percent of the total during the same period, while the high school enrollment increased from 16.3 percent to 33.6 percent, making the enrollments for the three groupings practically equal in 1940.

The fact that high school enrollment has more than doubled in Lawrence county during this period may be attributed to the fact that an increasing number of eighth grade graduates are continuing their education in high school.

Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Elementary and Secondary Enrollment by Grades, 1920 - 1940

Year	Grade											
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1920	13.4	10.9	8.6	11.9	10.0	10.6	9.2	9.2	6.2	4.7	3.0	2.3
1925	10.9	9.8	9.5	9.2	8.8	9.3	8.8	7.6	10.3	7.6	4.5	3.7
1930	9.1	8.7	9.1	8.5	9.2	8.4	7.9	9.1	9.9	7.4	6.9	5.8
1935	10.5	8.5	7.6	8.4	8.2	8.6	7.9	8.9	9.4	8.2	6.9	6.9
1940	9.9	8.3	8.9	8.0	8.2	8.0	7.8	7.1	9.8	9.6	8.0	6.4

Source: Biennial Reports of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1920, 1925, 1930, 1935 and 1940

How Certain South Dakota Rural Communities Are Successfully
Solving the Declining Enrollment Problem

School boards confronted with the problem of declining enrollments should study their local situation carefully before taking action. The four plans listed below have all been tested by different South Dakota communities and have been found practical. One or the other of the first two alternatives has frequently been used as a temporary measure until further action was necessary. The last two plans are in the nature of a more or less permanent reorganization of the present rural district system.

Cooperating with nearby rural schools

When enrollment has dropped to five or fewer pupils certain districts have kept their district organization intact but have closed one or more schools. In cases where all schools of the district have been closed, the remaining pupils have been sent to the nearest adjoining rural school where satisfactory arrangements for tuition and transportation could be made.

Tuition pupils to town schools

Where satisfactory arrangements could not be made with nearby rural schools, the remaining pupils have been sent as tuition students to the nearest independent school in village or town. This plan is frequently no more expensive than the first, but has the further advantage of better educational experience than is usually possible in the one room school. In effect, it is essentially the same method which has been successfully used in sending farm children as tuition pupils to high school.

Consolidation

Where the second plan has been in operation for a number of years, town and nearby country districts have frequently consolidated into a single district. Such a plan has many advantages, but should first be tried out informally as a centralized school system before determining the details of consolidation.

County-wide district plan

The county-wide system exists in the four unorganized counties of South Dakota, Shannon, Todd, Washington and Washabaugh. Under this plan one county school board determines the location of rural schools and can regulate the number of such schools to fit in with the enrollment trend.
